
Leung Ping-kwan (Ye Si), Travelling with a Bitter Melon; Selected Poems (1973-1989), bilingual publication with a preface by Martha P. Y. Cheung (ed.) and an introduction by Rey Chow

Hong Kong, Asia 2000 Ltd., 2002

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 This collection brings together poems written over 25 years and serves to illuminate the contrasts and the development of the poet's thought. Most of the poems are lengthy and composed in a free form approaching that of prose.
- 2 As Martha Cheung and Rey Chow observe in their preface, Leung Ping-kwan talks of simple things in simple language. Rey Chow tells us that the author himself appreciates in the works of others neither the felicity of expression nor the fine comparison, but rather the way in which a whole outlook and particular way of speaking reveal themselves in the most commonplace observation and the most down-to-earth use of language.
- 3 This remark suggests that Leung Ping-kwan could be compared with the French poet Antoine Emaz, who also attends to the anodyne detail and underlines the beauty which normally escapes attention, expressing them in the simplest and apparently most accessible language. In his "Krakow history museum", Leung writes that "In the simple

way in which people live, there is a living spirit". But any possible comparison with Emaz surely ends there, for Leung Ping-kwan's poetry is both deeply rooted in traditional China and buffeted by the cosmopolitan currents of modern life.

- 4 The collection is almost completely chronological, and is divided into eight sections whose titles express the author's favourite themes. In the first section, "The crickets are singing" and "Lotus leaves" give voice to his attachment to traditional Chinese culture, the small events in life, and the unremarked beauties in nature, which are also to be detected in food and cooking. The author pays particular attention to the latter in "Food monograph", while his "Travel poems" contains reflections on changing places bordering on detachment. In "Ancient cities", "Behind the walls", "Museums", and "Redrawing the maps", the author's historical and political interest in the different cities and countries of the world is clearly apparent, along with his strong sense of commitment.
- 5 Leung Ping-kwan's poetry also reflects his life in Hong Kong, a city which both preserves Chinese tradition (having avoided the ravages of Chinese communist politics) and has for a long time been engaged with the materialism of contemporary society. Placed between the past and the present, between the Hong Kong where he has lived since a few months after his birth, the US cities where he pursued his studies, and the European cities which he has visited, Leung assumes the stance of a traveller surveying daily life just as though he were discovering a new country: he is always close at hand, attentive, curious, and at the same time detached. His poetry is actually very concrete; the details and objects described emanate their own light, as does the atmosphere of particular places, and the relations between living beings. But it is not only a poetry of images, for sounds too have their place, present in a diffuse manner or silently conveyed within the sonority of the words, while the predominant colour seems to be a matching brown.
- 6 The highly sensitive detachment of the traveller of the early collections later turns towards the political commitment of a poet concerned by all that he sees, in whatever country, and whatever the history which it has undergone. Behind the anodyne sentences and the minor events, there are many hurts to be revealed to us. Through this approach, the reader is put into closer touch with the sufferings of others: "[...] We also have our fears, the tourists photograph the remains of an immense cauldron (used for torture), while we imagine quite other hells" ("The Tiger and Leopard Villa"). While Leung nearly always retains the allusiveness of traditional Chinese poetry, he never fails to make us understand movements of revolt, sometimes derisively, but always with great tenderness (for example: "Why is the bus not coming? History is behind us, red as soya sauce", in "The Imperial Palace"). He conveys to us the sufferings of people subjected to authority, whether in mainland China, Poland, or Hong Kong, particularly in the sections entitled "Behind the walls" and "Redrawing the maps".
- 7 Landscapes or cityscapes, descriptions of modern life or evocations of the past, this poetry (which the preface writers classify as post-modern, although it has none of the latter's characteristic grey and lifeless negativity) is outstandingly modern in its timelessness and freedom from reigning fashions. As Leung himself observes, a Hong Kong writer should not be too bothered by such concerns, given the very small readership that he encounters. His work is lyrical in its celebration of the details of daily life and in its evocation of a diverse and multifaceted future. Without any pretentiousness it raises all sorts of questions, from the humdrum to the most

metaphysical (on the identity of countries deprived of their history through war, on memory, and on language), but it is never austere or static. The poems arise from within a dynamic of ceaseless encounters and crossovers, “always on the border, always in transition” (“Images of Hong Kong”, p. 322). They are in perpetual movement, without a preconceived goal but simply seeking to seize hold of a privileged moment. His world is one of evanescence, where everything changes, passes, and is renewed, where all that is built is destroyed to be built again, as in the remarkable poem “Behind the walls” (p. 192): “One wall crumbles and another rises”.

- 8 The key word in this collection is without doubt *ouran*, “by chance”: the goal is to seek out precisely what is fortuitous, contingent, and lasting only long enough to be noted and memorised in a poem. In this vision of the world, where the evanescence of things of classical poetry coalesces as though in a shared whirlwind with the rapid changes of the modern world, every person and every thing still has its own place and existence, even the least noticeable bitter melon. In this respect, Leung insists on the importance of eating and meals, not so much in response to a tradition which sees in eating the need to devour and to express a certain aggressiveness, but rather as a way of suggesting a moment of sharing.
- 9 This is very well expressed in the title of the last poem which is also that of the whole collection: “Travelling with a bitter melon”. In this poem, through his tender attention to a bitter melon given to him during his travels, the poet invites us to reflect on the fragility of human relations, the separations and reunions, and the boundaries that must be crossed to meet again: “I set the table alone, separated by an ocean, I would dearly love to taste with you the refreshing flesh of this melon, so many things are not as we wish, the world of men is full of flaws, but the bitter melon understands”. Even a bitter melon holds a meaning that stretches beyond itself. In the same way, thanks to this poem one is reminded of the painting by Zhu Da (eighteenth century) called “Melon and moon”, whose foreground is occupied by the full roundness of the melon while behind it there is an empty circle; here too there is a close attention to simple things, a metaphysical meaning, and also a political one, since the melon represents fidelity to the dynasty that was replaced by the Manchus at a time when the painter was living in exile, hidden in a Buddhist monastery.
- 10 This poem emblematically draws together the author’s reflections on travelling, food, living beings, and the experience of life, and so it represents the central principle of his work which ranges, in Martha P. Y. Cheung’s words, “from poetic discovery to political intervention”.